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Dear John:

I appreciate your reply, and as I've said, fully understand the tyrrany of the in-box at any busy magazine.

At the same time you didn't address my main point, which I made in response to Rheingold's cry of poverty and imminent doom. My point is that first you have to cut costs and the obvious place is the product itself: WER delivers too much material, in type that is too tiny, on pages that are too crowded. This is no mere aesthetic criticism, but a comment on the fundamental imbalance in your publishing equation.

You say that you need 25,000 subscribers soon, and that direct mail doesn't work for you. These assertions suggests to me that you don't really comprehend the equation of publishing. This equation is absolutely ruthless, though often slow in delivering the punch, due to the inteia of cash continuing to trickle in. Nevertheless, you have to get your actual revenues -- subscribers plus ads plus book advances -- into line with actual costs -- you, the office, the staff, paper and printing, authors, marketing There's no escaping it.

From a position of balance you can maneuver to grow. From imbalance you can't do anything but go bankrupt. You can blame the subscribers if you want, but that is only another way of failing to hear the message they have been sending to you.

The message is that they don't really like what you are publishing lately. They probably don't hate it but it doesn't make them show the magazine to their friends, either. If they really did like it, you would be getting enough white mail and blow-ins to hold even, and evidently you are not.

So what can you affect in the equation? You can add to one side of the equation and you can subtract from the other. You can add new revenue if you can find it; WER seems chronically to rely on the Glorious Messenger of book advances. However, as I told Rheingold, I bet that this is a diminishing well. You can subtract costs, and of all

the particles in the equation, your own costs are the only ones you can directly and immediately affect.

So you have to go on a cost-cutting rampage. Your editors will hate you for it. But to my eye, the most obvious place you are wasting money and effort is in the editorial package itself, too much stuff, too tiny type, too many pages. I think you can get 20% out of every dimension of it without any reader complaining he has been shorted -- and this would include your paper, printing and postage bills: 96 pages would be quite enough.

If you would bite down on this crucial dimension of the publishing equation, you would not only make a dent in the overall imbalance, I bet you would also find that your readers actually prefer the change, consider it an improvement, increasing the likelihood of renewals. Especially if you took advantage of the opportunity to redesign the magazine, bring it out of the 1960s.

You say direct mail doesn't work for you. Well, maybe, but it does work for everybody else who goes about it professionally and competently. So what did you try, how systematic were you? I know you've never surveyed your readers, so you don't really know who they are (besides the ones who write you letters), and if you don't know that, how can you select lists? I bet you dabbled a little bit in direct mail, found the results disappointing, and failed to capitalize on whatever you learned. Direct mail is a long game, not a quick fix. YOu test package, offer, list, and you track the results for years, looking for the islands of profit in a sea of red ink.

So have I any ideas? Of course. After you cut hell out of your costs, you can dance as follows:

--RAISE PRICE. YOur argument could be that the magazine is a rare little jewel and them things should cost more. I would go to $7.95, and if I were in your shoes, with complete information, I would probably find it necessary to go to $9.95.

--PUSH NEWSSTAND. You will be lucky to break even on the newsstand if you look at it alone, but you also have to look at the new subscribers you get from those copies. You should be able to track these subs separately, by coding the blow-ins and bind-ins in the newsstand copies. You want to push newsstand copies, and regulate the details of the draw with your distributor, until you get the maximum benefit in terms of new subs: squeeze the pig until it squeals. This means sitting down with printouts and calculating how many copies should go into every store, according to how many have been selling there, tracking sellthrough, and tracking bind-in response against it. Tedious work.

--EVERY READER GET A READER. This ploy has worked for other desperate magazines, and even for some not-so-desperate, In Context, for example. It only works if your readers like what you are doing, which might not be the case with WER right now.

--PROMOTE TO YOUR EXPIRES. Most magazines find that direct mail to lapsed subscribers pulls better than any other list. Treat them respectfully, tell them you miss them, ask whether they miss you too, and invite them to come back.

--Finally, after you really cut costs so you really do get the equation into balance, you can take your book advance windfall and use it to GET SERIOUS ABOUT DIRECT MAIL.

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Lookit, Sumser, giving you another argumentative reader letter that you have to take the time to mollify is no help, so please don't feel compelled to write me any mollifying reply.

However, if you want to have a substantive discussion of your alternatives with a qualified outside critic/advisor, you can write me, phone me, fax me or send me e-mail on Compuserve (71564,3570). If I can help I'm willing.

With best wishes,

John Kelsey